

MICHIGAN'S LGBTQ+ NEWS SOURCE SINCE 1993

Between LinesTM

BAPTIZED IN BELONGING
Michigan church affirms
trans teen's identity

FAMILY ON EIGHT WHEELS
Chosen families thrive in
roller derby's chaos

Alok's Sacred Stage

The artist is fighting anti-trans
hate with humor, healing and
unapologetic visibility

By Chris Azzopardi

BETTY WHO RECLAIMS JOY
Queer pop star gets candid
ahead of Detroit show

Dr. Paul Benson's

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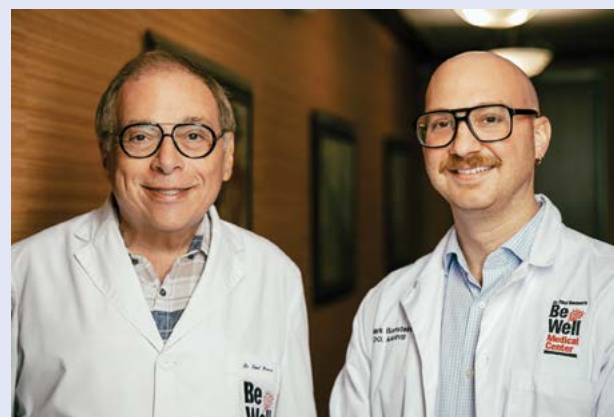
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Dr. Benson and Dr. Bornstein



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Photo: Laura Shepherd

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5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY KELLI DUNHAM

Ah, June. We love our Gay Pride. But by the third week, the group chats start buzzing with whispers of “Queer Exhaustion Month.” Between the marching, the dancing and the trying not to run into your exes or your therapist, it can be a lot. That’s why this week’s picks span the full spectrum of energy levels: from high-octane crowd surfing to cozy, low-key queer time.

Whether you’re fully recharged or running on vibes and iced coffee alone, we’ve got something that’ll meet you where you are and maybe even give you a little boost.



Affirmations prom, 2023. Courtesy photo

Party at Prom

Maybe your high school prom was magical. Maybe it was just magical-adjacent, in a “well, someone had a good time, but it sure wasn’t me” way. Maybe you grew up in a town like the one featured in “Footloose” but there was no Ren McCormack to take on your city council so you ended up sitting awkwardly at a euphemistically labeled “junior/senior banquet” table in the school cafeteria, wondering if dancing or being gay was a bigger sin. Just me?

Whatever your history, Affirmations is set to give your younger self the prom they deserved, with glitter instead of judgment. Come solo, bring a date, wear whatever makes you feel incredible and dance it out! Proceeds support Affirmations’ LGBTQ+ programming, so you can relive a milestone while building a better future. Also: photo booth. Obviously.

June 27, 8 p.m.-12 a.m., Affirmations (290 W. Nine Mile Road, Ferndale), goaffirmations.org/prom.



Mingle with Mocktails

Looking to add an afternoon Pride activity to your June party list but subtract the substances? McMillian Behavioral Health and Addiction Services has you covered with the second annual Sobritea, a sober tea dance at 215 West, benefiting the year-round activities of Ferndale Pride.

You’ll enjoy performances by local drag superstars Laila Grace Couture, Emma Sapphire, Serenity Sapphire and close encounters with Detroit’s hottest go-go dancers — plus dancing to DJ Reezy. Event coordinator Mark McMillan told Pride Source “now more than ever, queer and LGBTQ+ individuals need a safe and sober place to gather, dance and have fun. This is an event open to everyone, cis, het, gay, straight, sober or not!”

Sobritea: a great afternoon for anyone who wants to dance their heart out and remember it the next morning.

June 22, 4 p.m., 215 West (215 W. Nine Mile Road, Ferndale), bit.ly/Sobritea.



Live Our History

Whether you’ve been a big ol’ queer since the Reagan administration or just discovered your rainbow heart this year, if you’re over 45, Vintage Pride is for you. This peer-led support group meets monthly at the Salus Center to talk community, identity, life and what comes after coming out. There’s a special kind of magic in sharing space, and this group offers just that but with fewer trust falls and more mutual support. New folks are always welcome.

June 21 (and every third Saturday), 2–3:30 p.m., Salus Center (408 S. Washington Square, Lansing), bit.ly/vintagepride.



Ruth Ellis Mural at the Clairmount Center. Courtesy photo

Learn Our History

Historian Michael Boettcher's lecture "Get Your Detroit Queer History Straight" is more than just informative. It's a powerful reminder that queer folks have always been here, building community and creating joy long before hashtags or hookup apps. From historic Club Frontenac to the storied legacy of LGBTQ-affirming Detroit neighborhood Palmer Park, Boettcher brings Detroit's LGBTQ+ past to life through vivid, grounded storytelling.

The event is held at Gigi's for a reason: Gigi's doesn't just share LGBTQ+ history — it is LGBTQ+ history. For decades, it's been a sanctuary, a stage and a home. As owner Luis Mandujano told Pride Source, "For the past 52 years, we have invested into a safe space for all those who feel they need a place to find love."

Come learn how we can honor that legacy and make sure our queer spaces don't slip away.

June 26, 7 p.m., Gigi's Gay Bar (16920 W. Warren Ave., Detroit), bit.ly/detroitqueerhistory.



First NYC Dyke March, 1993. Photo: NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, Saskia Scheffer

Support Your Local Dyke March

This year showed how quickly corporate sponsors abandon Prides when public support fades. Dyke March organizers have long known big-business money brings complications. Hence, Dyke Marches: loud, scrappy, political, un-permitted and beautiful, often held the night before bigger Pride events.

We couldn't find one coming up in Michigan, but these grassroots efforts are often well-kept secrets — ask around or take a road trip. Whether you march or honor the tradition another way, support by reading Dyke March history, donating to a queer archive or uplifting initiatives for older lesbians and dykes. You can start with lesbianherstoryarchives.org.

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‘We See You’: Michigan Church Embraces Trans Teen Through Baptism Reaffirmation

Okemos Presbyterian Church offers powerful moment of affirmation for transgender youth

BY BRIDGETTE M. REDMAN

When 16-year-old Zach Nawyn-Hellinga stood before the congregation of the Presbyterian Church of Okemos in January, he wasn’t just reaffirming his baptism — he was claiming his name, his identity and his place in the church. The congregation stood and said in unison, “We see you.”

Rev. Lisa Schrott, the pastor of the church, said the service was an act of love for both Nawyn-Hellinga, a trans teenager, and the congregation.

“For Zach, we wanted him to know that he was valued and loved and cared for by this congregation and that he was created in the image of God and that the congregation recognized that,” Schrott said. “We also wanted the congregation to understand what that can mean to utter the words that we are all created in the image of God — and what that really means is that we make sure everybody feels seen and included in the congregation.”

The idea originated during Nawyn-Hellinga’s confirmation classes. Rebecca Mattern, who was then coordinator of pastoral care and youth ministry at the Presbyterian Church of Okemos, said they were covering baptism and its meaning.

Mattern approached Schrott to discuss that Nawyn-Hellinga had been baptized with his dead name and whether it would be appropriate to have a reaffirmation before he was confirmed. It was brought before the church’s governing body and everyone expressed enthusiasm.

Others in the faith community have had similar moments of affirmation. Claude Johnson-Perry found acceptance from the late Father Bill Lugger. Johnson-Perry converted to Catholicism in 2019 after transitioning. Lugger welcomed him and stressed that the church baptizes souls, not genders.



While Johnson-Perry was originally pushed out by the person offering the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA), he returned after a more supportive person was put into the position — someone who referred to him with his correct name and pronouns and was respectful to him as a person.

“It struck me that it really didn’t matter what gender you were because God welcomes you all the same, and so did Father Bill,” Johnson-Perry said.

While the worldwide Catholic Church does not offer the affirmation of trans individuals that this particular Lansing church did for Johnson-Perry, the national Presbyterian Church (USA) is committed to welcoming all in the LGBTQ+ community.

“There’s a narrative of ‘love the sinner and hate the sin’ — it’s not like that [with us],” Mattern said.

“We love you for who you are, and I hope that [Nawyn-Hellinga] will carry that with him for the rest of his life.”

The Presbyterian Church’s theology is that a person is baptized once, but reaffirmations are part of their practice.

“He was baptized with a different name, but he’s the same person,” Mattern explained. “We change throughout our whole lives, and we aren’t rebaptized every time we have a new revelation about ourselves. We still honor that original baptism, and we also wanted to honor that the name doesn’t fit anymore.”

On Jan. 12, Nawyn-Hellinga was joined by his family at the front of the congregation where Mattern, Schrott and the Clerk of Session asked him the questions of his reaffirmation and led the congregation in a responsive liturgy.

“The congregation just resoundingly said, ‘We see you,’” Mattern noted. “They said it loud and with confidence, and several of the members of the congregation had tears in their eyes. If I hadn’t processed it and cried before I got there, I would have been crying, because we are in a time where there is a concerted effort to erase trans people. They’re being told that they don’t exist, that they’re predators. Their parents are being told they’re grooming. It is the job of the church, and the calling of the church, to say to those who are in the margins, ‘We see you and we love you.’ No matter what the world says, you are a beloved child of God.”

Schrott said they added their Clerk of Session because they wanted it to be clear that it was an action of the church, not a rogue pastoral choice.

Nawyn-Hellinga was baptized as

a baby at the Presbyterian Church of Okemos in 2009. His mother, Stephanie Nawyn, explained that the family was living in Istanbul, where she was on a Fulbright fellowship, when Nawyn-Hellinga began expressing interest in identifying as a boy or gender fluid. He was in kindergarten.

“One of the things I’ve learned through this process is that sometimes you can be surprised where you find acceptance,” Nawyn said. “Turkey is a very gender binary culture. For a kid in kindergarten, he was in an unusual space.”

When they returned home, his Sunday school teacher at the Okemos church, whom Nawyn estimated was 88 years old, approached Nawyn and said that she’d noticed her child seemed

See **Baptism**, page 17

Skrmetti Supreme Court Case Could Reshape Trans Rights Nationwide — Including in Michigan

Why the local LGBTQ+ community can't afford to be complacent

BY ANNI ARBOUR

While Michigan's transgender community currently enjoys stronger legal protections than many other states, a looming U.S. Supreme Court decision could dramatically shift the landscape of trans rights across the country.

The case at the center of this potential change is *U.S. v. Skrmetti*, which originated when parents of a 15-year-old transgender girl in Tennessee, along with several other plaintiffs, challenged their state's sweeping ban on gender-affirming care for trans youth younger than 18.

Tennessee's law, known as Public Chapter No. 1, doesn't just prohibit doctors from providing gender-affirming medical care to minors. According to the ACLU, it also forces trans youth already receiving care to stop treatment within nine months of the law taking effect and creates a pathway for private lawsuits against medical providers who treat transgender young people.

But the implications stretch far beyond Tennessee's borders and beyond health care access for minors.

The bigger picture

Legal experts say this case could determine whether transgender people as a group receive enhanced protection from discrimination under federal law. The Supreme Court's decision will likely hinge on how justices classify transgender people within the legal framework of constitutional protection.

The central question in *Skrmetti* is whether Tennessee's ban on gender-affirming care for minors violates the equal protection clause. But to answer that, the court may need to decide what level of scrutiny applies to laws targeting transgender individuals.

Currently, the courts recognize different levels of scrutiny when evaluating whether laws violate the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. People discriminated against because of race, religion, national origin or citizenship status fall into what's called the "suspect class," which receives the highest level of protection called "strict scrutiny." Under this standard, the government must prove its actions serve a compelling interest and are necessary to achieve that goal.

Advocates argue transgender people should receive quasi-suspect class protection because gender identity is an immutable characteristic and the trans community lacks sufficient political power to protect itself through the legislative process.

A step below that is "intermediate scrutiny," applied to "quasi-suspect" classifications. Laws affecting these groups must serve an important government purpose

and be substantially related to achieving that purpose. Gender-based laws, like those allowing alimony only for women or requiring only men to register for the draft, typically receive this intermediate level of review.

The case took an unexpected turn when President Donald Trump took office. While the Biden administration's Justice Department had supported the challenge to Tennessee's law, the new administration has switched sides and now backs the state's position.

A wake-up call for Michigan

Despite Michigan's current status as a relatively safe haven for transgender rights, the *Skrmetti* decision could have lasting consequences here, too. A ruling against the plaintiffs would signal to other states that anti-trans legislation can withstand federal constitutional challenges.

Even in Michigan, legal protections aren't permanent. The state's Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act currently includes gender identity protections, but those could potentially be revised if political winds shift and a majority in the state legislature supports changes.

The Supreme Court heard arguments in December, and a decision is expected this month. For transgender Michiganders and trans people nationwide, the stakes couldn't be higher.

A victory could establish stronger federal protections and make it harder for states to pass discriminatory laws. A loss, however, might embolden more states to enact restrictions similar to Tennessee's, potentially affecting everything from health care access to employment protections to participation in public life.

But this case should serve as a wake-up call for Michigan's trans community and allies. While this state currently provides a haven for transgender rights, that protection isn't guaranteed forever. It only takes a shift in political winds and majority support in the state legislature to rewrite the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act and strip away hard-won protections.

The wave of anti-trans legislation sweeping across other states shows how quickly rights can disappear when communities become complacent. Michigan's transgender residents and their supporters can't afford to assume their current safety will last without continued advocacy and political engagement.

As we await the *Skrmetti* decision, it's time to strengthen the coalitions and political infrastructure that protect transgender Michiganders today — because tomorrow's threats may be closer than we think.

FEEDBACK

Lather Me, Daddy: Readers Go Wild Over Motor City Bears Car Wash Coverage

Community event raises nearly \$1,700 for Ruth Ellis Center and Affirmations, brings bear awareness to the forefront

You loved our coverage of the Motor City Bears getting sudsy for a good cause at their 17th annual charity car wash in Ferndale earlier this month. The group raised funds for Ruth Ellis Center and Affirmations, and our photo gallery had you all feeling some type of way over on Facebook (@pridesource).



Motor City Bears 2025 car wash. Courtesy photo

"LISTEN!!! MY insurance rates would have gone up...the way I woulda crashed looking and trying to turn into their area... chile!!"

— Kendell D. Milton

"Love it. I just wish I had the confidence to wear those speedos. You all look fabulous!"

— Mark Nelson

"Yessssss daddies!!!!"

— Christina Lopez

"Always enjoy getting our car washed by the guys! They know how to have fun and entertain!!"

— Cj Meeks

"WHERE'S MOTOR CITY IM MOVING."

— Harley Cooper

"I will not stand for this lack of Otter representation. Otters are people too and we should be celebrated along with the bears."

— Andrew Kubacki

"I didn't even know this happened or my car would have been WASHED!"

— Tyler Olson

"...anyone have the number of that muscle bear? No reason"

— Jack Pinto

"PUT'EM ON THE GLASS"

— David McMahan

"This is the equality I like to see."

— Ariana Mathieu

Read the full story and see more photos at pridesource.com.



Motor City Bears 2025 car wash. Courtesy photo

Your Story, Your Health: Local Study Aims to Improve LGBTQ+ Care

U-M study seeks gay and bi men to improve HIV prevention efforts

BY ANDREA POTEET-BELL

With anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and policy rollbacks on the rise, it's easy to feel powerless.

But a study from the University of Michigan offers a tangible way to push back — right here in Southeast Michigan — by sharing your story through research that values LGBTQ+ experiences and builds evidence for better healthcare and policy.

The Verve study, led by the University of Michigan School of Nursing, explores how relationship dynamics impact HIV prevention among gay and bisexual men. It's a chance for Southeast Michigan's LGBTQ+ community to contribute to research that could shape future care and policy at a time when such opportunities may become increasingly rare.

Filling a critical research gap

Verve focuses on a group historically underrepresented in health research: cisgender gay and bisexual men in relationships with other men.

"We know that intimate partner violence does happen in same-sex relationships," said Renee Pitter, clinical research project manager at the University of Michigan School of Nursing. "But primarily studies have focused on women."

This research gap has real-world consequences. As Pitter explained, "When two men are in a domestic dispute, a lot of times it's more seen as a fight than abuse... it's assumed to be mutual, and so people don't take it as seriously as with men and women."

This perception — shared by healthcare providers, law enforcement and even within LGBTQ+ communities — can prevent effective intervention and support. And critically, in the context



of HIV prevention, controlling or abusive dynamics may create barriers to accessing care and maintaining healthy behaviors.

Understanding the connection

The Verve study follows participants over two years to understand how relationship experiences, particularly intimate partner violence, may impact HIV prevention efforts. One of its core research questions examines whether unhealthy or controlling relationship dynamics make it harder for individuals to access or maintain HIV prevention strategies like Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP).

"That's one of the questions that we want to get at in this study," Pitter said. "If you have a controlling partner that won't let you get your medications, or that won't agree to using condoms, or whatever the case may be... intimate partner violence could be a potential reason why people struggle to protect themselves."

Privacy and safety

Because Verve asks participants to share sensitive information about

their relationships, the research team has implemented comprehensive privacy protections. All participants are identified only by study ID numbers, never by name. Digital files are stored on encrypted, HIPAA-compliant systems, and all researchers follow strict guidelines established by the university's Institutional Review Board.

"When participants are sharing their information, it does not leave beyond the study team, unless there's a legal reason to do so," Pitter emphasized. "Our first priority is our participants. We want to ensure their safety, their privacy and their confidentiality."

Despite the sensitive nature of the topics, Pitter noted that participants are often surprisingly open once they feel safe and supported. There are many people who want to share their story and help their community.

Fighting back locally

Verve represents more than academic research — it's about building evidence that can improve health outcomes and drive lasting change for LGBTQ+ communities, Pitter said. It's common for people

in marginalized communities to feel isolated or dismissed, she explained. But when research documents concrete patterns, individual experiences become part of a collective voice that can influence healthcare practices, guide prevention programs, and support more inclusive policies.

This work is especially urgent given the current political climate. Funding for LGBTQ+ health research has faced cuts, and future support remains uncertain.

Understanding how relationship dynamics affect HIV prevention could lead to more effective interventions, such as couple-based counseling programs, safety planning resources, or healthcare protocols that screen for intimate partner violence in HIV prevention settings. It could also inform future efforts to support LGBTQ+ individuals in accessing preventive care.

How to participate

Verve focuses on understanding the conditions that enable people to make empowered, informed choices about their health. By identifying specific relationship factors that affect HIV risk, researchers hope

to develop more effective, targeted interventions that help the local LGBTQ+ community.

The study is currently enrolling participants throughout Southeast Michigan, including Wayne, Oakland, Washtenaw and surrounding counties. To be eligible, individuals must be:

- HIV-negative cisgender men who have sex with men
- Over 18 years old
- Currently in a relationship with another cisgender man
- English-speaking
- Living in Southeast Michigan

For safety reasons, only one member of a couple may enroll in the study.

Participation involves both in-person visits and online components over two years. Every six months, participants attend clinic visits in Ann Arbor or Detroit for HIV testing and to provide biological samples (urine test, self-collected anal swab and blood draw). Every three months, participants complete online surveys about their relationships and health behaviors.

Participants receive compensation after each component, totaling up to \$410 over the full two-year study period. This compensation helps cover time and travel expenses.

Enrollment for the Verve study remains open, though interested individuals are encouraged to apply soon as capacity is limited.

"We can't do this important work without people who are willing to give their time and effort," Pitter said. "We really, really appreciate everyone who participates."

This content is made possible through our partnership with the University of Michigan. To see if you qualify or to learn more about the Verve study, visit sexualityandhealth.org/verve.



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FAST TRACK TO FAMILY

Chosen families and alter egos define a sport where getting knocked down means getting helped back up



Detroit Roller Derby. Photo: Abby West

BY LAYLA MCMURTRIE

As Pride celebrations bring chosen family together across Southeast Michigan, the state's roller derby tracks buzz with their own year-round version of radical belonging. Here, the search for community happens at every practice and every bout —

complete with bruises, glitter and the kind of fierce acceptance that comes from blocking someone at full speed and then helping them up.

At a roller derby bout, skates pound the floor, the crowd roars and perfectly timed blocks send players flying. But beyond the spectacle, Michigan's derby scene

offers something deeper than sport: a sanctuary where queer, trans and nonbinary athletes find not just teammates, but true family.

For the uninitiated, roller derby is a fast-paced, full-contact sport played on an oval track. Two teams compete to score points by helping their designated "jammer" lap opposing players, while blockers

try to stop them — sometimes with strategic hits that are as punishing as they are precise. Think rugby on wheels, with a little glam and a lot of grit.

In cities like Detroit and Lansing, derby isn't just athleticism — it's identity, freedom and belonging all rolled into one.

Veronica Cockrell, known

as Red Zeppelin on the track, found that sense of home when she joined Lansing Roller Derby. After relocating to the area, she craved connection and found it at a bootcamp hosted by the league.

"It's so hard as an adult to find adult friends, unless you work at a place that has a really good work culture," Cockrell says. She

adds that it helps when people see themselves reflected in the team. “The majority of our skaters are not heterosexual, and I think that makes it easier for other LGBTQ+ people to also want to join.”

Derby’s embrace of queer and trans athletes isn’t accidental. With DIY roots and punk-feminist flair, modern roller derby was revived in the early 2000s by skaters who built grassroots leagues, crafted their own gear and adopted bold alter egos, according to the National Women’s History Museum. It quickly became a magnet for those pushed to the margins of traditional sports — a space shaped by Riot Grrrl ethos and third-wave feminism.

That legacy is alive and rolling in Michigan.

“It’s a very fun, welcoming environment,” Cockrell adds. “The games are very fast-paced. It’s a lot of fun to get out and just cheer for your friends.”

Detroit Roller Derby skater Marie Mastrangelo, known by her derby name Tonka, came to the sport during a major turning point in her life.

“I’ve been skating with the league for a little over a year,” she says. “I had never skated before joining, so I went through the bootcamp process, which is the standard way to get into the league unless you already have derby experience.”

She had dreamed of skating ever since watching “Whip It,” the 2009 roller derby film starring Elliot Page, which was filmed in Detroit. Life, however, got in the way. “I was in college, working three jobs... I just didn’t have time,” she says.

Looking back, she’s glad she waited.

“I grew up super conservative, and I don’t think I would have been ready for the radical culture of derby at that time,” Mastrangelo



Detroit Roller Derby. Photo: Abby West

explains. “I went through major life changes — coming out, leaving conservative religious spaces — that really shaped me.”

She adds, “Derby has been a huge part of that journey. The league is incredibly diverse in age, gender expression, socioeconomic background and identity... It’s a vulnerable and welcoming space, and I wouldn’t have been ready for it 10 years ago.”

It was a connection through her wife that ultimately brought Mastrangelo into the sport.

“My wife ran a coffee shop and was hiring baristas. She hired someone who had grown up playing roller derby. The first time we met, she immediately asked my wife, ‘Has Marie ever considered derby?’ Apparently, I had the build for it,” she says. “She spent two years trying to recruit me, but I

knew how big of a commitment it was, so I kept saying no.”

Then, in December 2023, Mastrangelo had a moment of reflection where she felt ready for a new hobby. Today, Mastrangelo not only skates, but she also serves as the league’s human resources rep, welcoming new skaters and helping them step into derby life.

“I probably get three or four emails a week from people who hear about us in different ways — whether they see us in action, meet a skater or just find out about roller derby and think it’s cool,” she says. “My job is to guide them through our process, which usually involves getting them into our bootcamp programs. That’s how we teach people to skate and prepare them for a full-contact sport.”

This kind of intentional care and inclusivity is built into the

infrastructure of the league in many ways.

“There has been a very intentional shift from ‘Detroit Derby Girls’ to ‘Detroit Roller Derby.’ The rebranding is a big deal — it reflects our commitment to inclusivity,” she says. “The league has a lot of trans and nonbinary skaters, and when you join a home team, your jersey includes your number, name and pronouns.”

Small but meaningful steps like that make the league a truly affirming space. But that sense of community goes beyond identity.

For skaters like Abby West — whose derby name is Shulk, a nod to She-Hulk — derby also offered visibility and belonging she hadn’t found elsewhere. She joined Detroit Roller Derby in 2016, just after the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) updated

its gender policy to be explicitly inclusive of trans athletes.

But inclusion hasn’t always been consistent.

After moving back to Traverse City in 2020, West skated with two local rural leagues before cutting ties due to discriminatory practices.

“As of June 11 last year, I cut ties with both leagues because of things they were doing that I could not support,” she explains.

Still, West remains deeply connected to the community she found in Detroit.

“Derby just spoke to me,” West says. “I jumped in, broke a pair of skates within a month and a half, and realized, ‘I need to invest in this.’ I haven’t had any regrets since.”

The culture off the track is just as dynamic as what happens during jams.

“You’ll see some of the widest mixes of people you’ll ever see,” West adds. “Blue-collar, white-collar, high income, low income, queer, straight, trans, cis — it’s a really great way to bring different facets of people’s identities together.”

But derby’s governing structures still have growing to do. WFTDA, hampered by limited funding, lacks enforcement power when it comes to discrimination.

“If someone experiences transphobia or discrimination, there’s no official reporting mechanism,” West says. “That needs to change.”

Still, skaters like West, Mastrangelo and Cockrell remain hopeful. The bruises and grueling practices are real, but so is the joy — and the love. Roller derby in Michigan is more than a sport. It’s about finding your people — and knowing they’ve got your back, on and off the track.



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Trump's Birthday Party Bust Prompts Anti-Trans, Anti-Immigrant, Anti-Democrat Rant



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

On June 16, a day after millions of United States Americans hurt his feelings by not showing up for his tank parade birthday party and only one man tried to prove his love for Trump by shooting and killing Democratic legislators, Trump vented on Truth Social, vowing to begin an even harsher crackdown on undocumented immigrants. I'm going to quote from a redacted version of his post while refraining from repeating his demeaning, anti-immigrant language.

In the post, Trump vowed to "expand efforts to detain and deport [undocumented immigrants] in America's largest Cities, such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York, where Millions upon Millions of [undocumented immigrants] reside."

Millions of undocumented immigrants do, indeed, live in the U.S. However, the vast majority of these people are not gang members and dangerous criminals, as Trump and the Republicans want everyone to believe. Most of them are, like you and me, people just trying to pay the bills, take care of the people they love, and find a bit of joy in life every now and then.

So what do Los Angeles, Chicago and New York have in common? Well, they are the three biggest cities in the country. They're also all run largely by Democrats at the state and local level. Houston, the fourth biggest city in the country, is in a red state, saving it from Trump's enemies list.

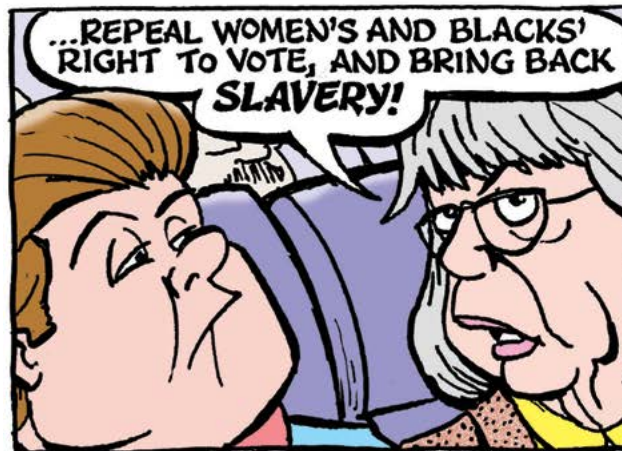
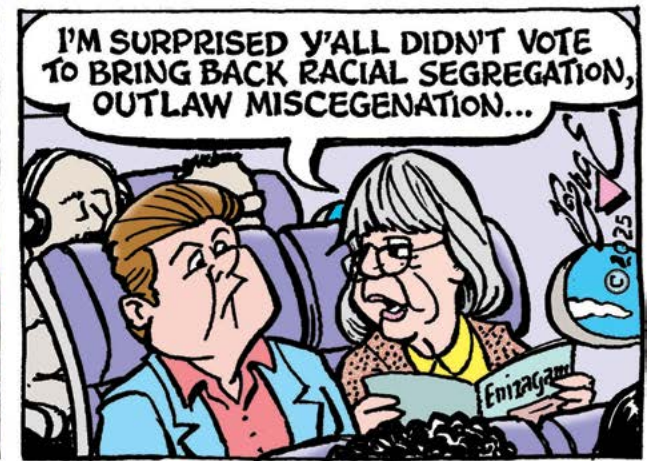
Of course, given the political violence against Democrats that had literally just happened a day before when a gunman posing as a police officer shot four people in their homes, killing a Minnesota state representative and her husband and wounding another representative and his wife, Trump issued a solemn message to Americans condemning political violence. He did not trash Democrats in his post lest he inflame more violence.

I'm just kidding. Of course he trashed Democrats. And he didn't say shit about the killings in the post.

Instead, Trump called Los Angeles, Chicago and New York "the core of the Democrat Power Center, where they use [undocumented immigrants] to expand their Voter Base, cheat in Elections, and grow the Welfare State, robbing good paying Jobs and Benefits from Hardworking American Citizens."

Important to note that nothing Trump wrote there is true, despite being posted on Truth Social. Oh, the irony.

As Ed Kilgore, political columnist for *Intelligencer*,



wrote, "It's all completely fabricated but reflects a distinctly Trumpian mash-up of the 'great replacement theory' and crime-wave myths."

In other words, these lies feed the even larger lie that there's a white genocide happening right before our eyes, perpetuated by violent Black and brown people. Utterly racist bullshit.

"Every day, the Brave Men and Women of ICE are subjected to violence, harassment and even threats from Radical Democrat Politicians," Trump, unfortunately, continued.

Ah, yes. ICE officers, so brave they cover their faces as they snatch people off of the street. They have to protect themselves from the mean Democrats who [looking at notes] have largely supported ICE for its entire duration (which is gross).

And how does Trump thank them for the decades of (unconscionable, mind you) support for ICE since its inception in 2003?

"These Radical Left Democrats are sick of mind, hate our Country, and actually want to destroy our Inner Cities," Trump wrote. "There is something wrong with them. That is why they believe in Open Borders, Transgender for Everybody, and Men playing in Women's Sports."

That's right! "Transgender for Everybody!" Somebody put that on a T-shirt.

Seriously, though. Trump's fixation, along with the Republican party's, on transgender people as the root of all of the country's problems is based on a completely imaginary transgender person who lurks in bathrooms, lures children to be trans like them and rips gold medals away from little girls. These categorizations are

dehumanizing — and dangerous.

"Aside from immigration, no group has received more attention from this administration's ire than transgender people, with dozens of executive orders, agency rulings, and policy memos designed to make daily life more difficult," reporter Erin Reed writes. "The vision advanced by Trump and those he's empowered is not one of inclusion gone too far. It's a world where transgender people are denied care, visibility, and existence. 'Transgender for nobody' is closer to the goal."

The Trump administration doesn't always get its way. There are still some courts willing to stop him. A good example is *San Francisco AIDS Foundation v. Trump*, a recent lawsuit brought by Lambda Legal.

"The Court blocked anti-equity and anti-LGBTQ executive orders that seek to erase transgender people from public life, dismantle DEI efforts, and silence nonprofits delivering life-saving services," writes Lambda Legal's Jose Abrigo.

It's good news, but in the long run, how are the courts going to stop a lawless president willing to incite violence?

In Trump's America, there is no room for transgender people, no room for immigrants, no room for any kind of opposition to his agenda. He wants to see huge swaths of the country eliminated.

It's rhetoric like Trump's that gets people — in this case, Democrats and transgender people — killed. Which, make no mistake, is exactly what he wants.

THE SCROLL

QUICK HITS & CAN'T MISSES

Queer Michigan Joins Statewide Resistance For 'No Kings' Protests

The “No Kings” protests on June 14 brought together millions of protesters who attended more than 2,000 demonstrations across all 50 states in what organizers called a “nationwide day of defiance” against the Trump administration. The mobilization was a direct response to a military parade in Washington, D.C. that coincided with President Donald Trump’s 79th birthday. Michigan saw exceptional turnout, with more than 70 protests from Ironwood in the U.P. to Adrian near the Ohio border. Several thousand people gathered at the Michigan Capitol in

Lansing, while Detroit’s Clark Park and Ann Arbor drew thousands more. Ferndale’s demonstration at 9 Mile and Woodward Avenue became a powerful symbol of queer resistance. About 4,000 people joined the protest, according to police. Protesters held signs with messages like “Queer Liberation” and “Trans Lives Matter” and lined the streets for several blocks in every direction. Cars traveling through the intersection honked in support during the entire event, which was scheduled for two hours but started early and ran late. One trans supporter in Ferndale told BTL, “If we don’t stand up for ourselves, who else will? Trump wants us dead — we aren’t letting that happen.” Throughout the event, demonstrators chanted “No ICE, no KKK, no fascist USA” and other messages aimed at MAGA Republican viewpoints.



“No Kings” protest in Ferndale, June 14, 2025. Photo: Sarah Bricker Hunt

Trump Blames Trans Community for Immigration, Military Policies

Fresh off the heels of massive “No Kings” protests against his administration over the weekend, President Donald Trump has adopted “Transgender for Everybody” as his latest catchphrase to justify harsh policies, most recently using it to defend expanded ICE crackdowns in major cities. In a Truth Social post on June 15 announcing immigration enforcement targeting Los Angeles, Chicago and New York, Trump blamed Democrats for supporting “Open Borders, Transgender for Everybody, and Men playing in Women’s Sports.” The phrase has become Trump’s go-to explanation for various policies, from his transgender military ban to immigration enforcement. At the West Point military academy on June 10, he called transgender inclusion “even dumber than” open-border policies while discussing deploying Marines to Los Angeles.

The administration has systematically targeted transgender people since taking office, scrubbing federal websites, defunding LGBTQ+ organizations and pressuring groups to deadname trans youth. Some critics see Trump’s latest slogan as justification for imposing sweeping crackdowns against the community.



Pride Source Magazine 2025-2026 Now Available

Michigan’s most comprehensive LGBTQ+ resource is here! Pride Source’s annual magazine and directory features over 850 trusted businesses, organizations and nonprofits standing with our community. From morning

coffee to wedding planning, find businesses that put their money where their values are. This year’s issue showcases the sacred work of leading trans advocate Jeynce Poindexter, explores how Michigan’s early LGBTQ+ activists created templates for today’s resistance, and reveals how nature can provide healing during political upheaval. In her powerful cover story, Poindexter reflects on her approach to advocacy: “I’m never shy about showing and

being my authentic self.” The magazine celebrates over five decades of Michigan’s rich queer legacy while providing practical tools for living authentically in challenging times. Pick up your free print copy at locations like Affirmations in Ferndale, download it at pridesource.com/download-btl, or become a print subscriber at pridesource.com/subscribe to receive both Between The Lines and Pride Source magazine delivered to your mailbox.

Celebrate Queer Artists in Pontiac

Queer artists take center stage at the Pontiac Creative Arts Center’s fourth annual Kaleidoscope exhibition, which kicks off with an opening reception on June 21 from 5-9 pm. at 47 Williams St. in downtown Pontiac. Kaleidoscope features diverse works from a wide array of artists, highlighting the power and breadth of LGBTQ+ artistic expression. The exhibition runs through July 23.

Detroit City Football Club Hosts Pride Night

Detroit City Football Club celebrates its first official Pride Night on June 21 at Keyworth Stadium with a soccer doubleheader, drag performances by Jadein Black, Vivian Aphrodisia and Lana Sevol and fundraising for Ruth Ellis Center. The Hamtramck club has supported the LGBTQ+ community since 2012, flying Pride flags year-round and embodying their “Forever, For All” motto beyond just Pride Month. Buy tickets at detcityfc.com.

Cole Escola Makes Tony Awards History

Cole Escola made Tony Awards history earlier this month, becoming the first nonbinary performer to win best leading actor in a play for their role as Mary Todd Lincoln in “Oh, Mary!” On the red carpet, Escola delivered a powerful message to LGBTQ+ youth: “You’re right. Everyone else is wrong.” The groundbreaking win follows previous nonbinary Tony victories by Alex Newell and J. Harrison Ghee in 2023 in musical categories.



Cole Escola.
Photo:
Instagram/@
arnold_daniel

In Conversation with Alok: Turning Queer Pain Into Grace, One Stage at a Time

The artist is fighting anti-trans hate with humor, healing and unapologetic visibility

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

In a world obsessed with categories, Alok Vaid-Menon is the question mark at the end of every assumption. They defy easy categorization, which is exactly the point. Writer, comedian, public speaker, fashion icon, activist — the gender-nonconforming, transfeminine artist juggles many hats, creating an utterly unique cultural space that's both deeply intimate and unapologetically political.

Through global tours, viral videos, powerful storytelling and widely regarded books, such as 2020's "Beyond the Gender Binary," Alok has become a resonant voice in the LGBTQ+ community and beyond — especially for those still finding language for who they are. Alok's name often comes up in conversations with other cultural trailblazers — like Margaret Cho, who recently praised their compassion, wit and "undeniable beauty." Alok even played a pivotal role in Demi Lovato's journey of discovering and announcing her nonbinary identity.

When I caught Alok in late April, they were stealing a breath between tour dates for "A Hairy Situation," a show that began in 2024. Two back-to-back performances await at The Magic Bag in Ferndale on June 27, starting at 7 p.m. Though Alok tells me that the material changed after Trump was elected, it continues to refuse the boundaries between stand-up, storytelling and extracted wisdom mined from lived reality.

How are you holding up considering all the challenges facing our community lately?

I feel like I'm trying my best to stave off cynicism. It can feel really futile. That's exactly what the powers that be want us to feel: hopeless and like there's no point. So I'm really trying to recalibrate. I think that's what's been really nice about touring. I feel like I get to tangibly create a different ecosystem, a space where people can just be themselves and be celebrated for that.

By the nature of people gathering in these spaces — especially now — does being on stage feel different to you? Is there a deeper level of connection or community at your shows right now?

I feel a lot of suffering. People are coming in with a lot of pain. And especially on this tour. I'm going to a lot of places in the South and the Midwest. I was in Kentucky a few days ago and Ohio before then. And the reason it's important to do these places is that queer people exist everywhere and should be able to exist everywhere.

A lot of times comedy is just pure escapism, and I'm not interested in that kind of comedy. We have to be honest about how brutal, cruel and relentless the world is. So each night is like a puzzle of how you react to what's happening and try to fashion something unique.

I spend a lot of time at my merch table afterwards, just talking to people and hearing their stories, what they're going through and what's on their mind. That keeps me fresh and acutely aware of the lives that people are living. I feel very lucky that the nature of my job requires so much exchange with other people because I can often feel isolated because I'm in a bunch of places where I don't know anyone. I'm in a bunch of countries where I'm like, is it safe for me to do this? What is so cool is this kind of reciprocal relationship between the people who come to my shows. I get to give them something, and then they give me so much back.

How did the material for "A Hairy Situation" shift or evolve after the election, given how the tone of the country also changed?

I would say it got a little bit darker. Inevitably it did. I really have been trying to understand the power of dark comedy. Dark comedy is a very risky business. You have to really thread a very fine line between, "Is this actually helpful" and "Is this just kind of self-indulgent sadness?"

What I think is so beautiful about being queer is that in so many ways, we are the originators of dark comedy: A lot of us learn how to be funny under conditions of extreme duress and pain. It's armor. My queer audiences are really tapping into dark comedy as not just a comedic genre, but a way of living. What I am trying to do with this tour is take hairy situations, which are situations that feel vexed and impossible, and say, OK, the only way forward is to be in the thick of it, in the armpit hair of it all. And to braid it. Style it. Take chest hair and make it into waves, and take the world that people often see as like, ew, why would you want to



Alok Vaid-Menon. Photo: Laura Shepherd

live there? Actually be like, no, there's still life here.

This show is like my thesis on how we can get through these times, which is to maintain a sense of silliness as things get more serious. Silliness makes your body quiver and shakes it in a way that makes it impossible for you to be held captive.

You've often spoken about joy as a powerful form of resistance. On this tour, what moments of joy have helped sustain you?

There have been so many. Because I'm kind of having the time of my life. Things are really awful, and I think one of the joys of

being nonbinary is, I don't judge myself for holding those two simultaneous truths. Right now, there's a prescribed emotional moment we're supposed to be having of like, OK, you're supposed to feel miserable. But I'm actually a believer that it is possible to feel joy and still acknowledge how horrific the things are around us. That's what dark comedy is — a practice of holding joy and sorrow simultaneously, and realizing that one doesn't cancel out the other.

So I've had some moments that just have felt so exhilarating. I did my first show in Honolulu. Before my show, I got invited to a potluck that happens on a given Monday night at this trans person's apartment. It could be three people or 40 people, and it's been there for over 10 years. This person never knows who's going to show up at their house, but they just keep their door open for anyone to come. So I got invited. We ended up having, like, 50 people there.

And it was this motley crew, all ages, all genders, all races of people who I had never met who cooked these incredible foods. Filipino food, native Hawaiian food. All these foods I'd never eaten before. We just stayed up late chatting, gallivanting. I was like, this is the coolest thing about being queer in the world: I don't know any of these people, and there's such immediate hospitality there and such immediate recognition. It's our suffering that allows us to be friends with one another, because we all know sorrow is a companion, and that's kind of our secret password into this world. And so we just bonded incredibly.

Then I met trans women who created a collective, a rotating party that celebrates queer native expression. I invited them all to come to the show. Put them on my guest list. There was just this incredible moment where their table was the one laughing the loudest at the darkest jokes. I felt so happy. And then afterwards we all went out late into the night, dancing in Honolulu and hearing their stories. I think that's the greatest joy, because when you're young and you're queer, you feel lonely and [it feels] impossible, and you feel like you're the only person in the world who feels the way that you do. What is so awesome about this tour is that I get to remember that there are millions of people across the world who experience the same flavor of pain as I do, and because of that, I can never truly be lonely or isolated because we're connected out of something.

Just the fact that you're putting this out into the world gives hope — reminding people that connection and community can show up in unexpected places, even briefly, and still mean a lot.

I feel like so much of the lie we're told is that things only matter if they're permanent and forever. But so much of what my silly, sacred, queer life has taught me is that it'll be just one dance floor, one night, 10 years ago that when I'm feeling despair, I can return to to be like, I got my best life.

It's that experience which the world would dismiss as ephemeral that actually has this enduring impression on me that makes me feel like things are going to be OK. And I want to be careful not to romanticize suffering, because I do believe that joy is our birthright, and we shouldn't have to go through pain in order to know. But I also believe that what queer people have done and are doing is some of the most incredible healing work on this planet. So I'm trying to find a balancing act of saying we shouldn't have to go through suffering. Because right now we do. We've developed some really

“It's our suffering that allows us to be friends with one another, because we all know sorrow is a companion, and that's kind of our secret password into this world.”

powerful methods that can change the world. And I think that's where I sometimes get frustrated: When people think that my work is just for queer people, or I'm just making jokes for trans people. I'm like, no, this is about a human practice of finding a way to still find joy amidst shame, finding a way to carve a good life for yourself to live and not just exist. Those are lessons that the entire world can learn. It's just that you're not willing to hear it from queer people, because you dismiss us immediately as not having any universal resonance.

You have a way of bringing people into the conversation who might not otherwise engage. What strategies have worked best for building understanding across divides? And what advice would you give to people

See **Alok**, page 26



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HIV Community Leaders Agree: It's Critical to Take Time for Yourself

In the face of relentless political pressure, activists like Dylan Boyer are turning to art, boundaries and rest to keep fighting

BY MATHEW RODRIGUEZ

Dylan Boyer recently decided it was once again time to get into his art studio. The 32-year-old Minnesota resident, who also happens to be the director of development at The Aliveness Project, the state's largest HIV/AIDS social service agency, needed a creative outlet. Returning to his practice as a stained glass designer, after three years away, was the answer.

"I haven't had the time or energy for it," he said. But, during this particularly hostile political climate, he's found that creating art is now an even more essential tool in his routine. "That's what rest looks like. It has nothing to do with the outside world — it has everything to do with me."

Boyer's definition of rest is in line with the origins of the idea of "self-care," a term that gets thrown around more than lightly nowadays. However, self-care has much less to do with consumerist tendencies, such as purchasing face masks or going to an expensive spa, than one might think. Much of its origins lie in civil rights and feminist organizing.

"Anyone who is interested in making change in the world also has to learn to take care of himself, herself, theirselves," Black feminist activist and philosopher Angela Davis said in a 2018 interview with AfroPunk.

In that same interview, Davis mentioned that many famous civil rights activists were engaged in a form of generative and restorative self-care. Former Black Panther Ericka Huggins taught herself yoga and meditation, and, just recently, a picture of icon Rosa Parks engaged in a bow pose made the rounds in traditional media.

"The fact that she did yoga does not at all contradict the other things that I know about her," Brenna Greer, associate professor of history at Wellesley College, told CNN in response to the picture. "She was often taking care of herself."

In these acts of self-care, some might hear resonances of Audre Lorde's infamous decree — written in her book "A Burst of Light," a series of essays and journal entries discussing her struggle with breast cancer — that "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."

People are pushed to become activists

That sense of preservation is one that many in the AIDS community feel now as the Trump administration has already demolished an infrastructure for global AIDS relief that took decades to build and maintain. Every day, a new news story about potential cuts to lifesaving social safety-net programs like Medicaid sends many organizers, activists, people living with HIV and people of marginalized identities into a panic.

That right-wing strategy is known as "flood the zone" — an attempt to overwhelm activists, as well as everyday Americans, into a stunned inactivity. The tactic began early in Trump's second term, as he unleashed a flood of executive orders that ended birthright citizenship, banned gender transitions for people under the age of 19, and pardoned the Jan. 6 insurrectionists.

Several people in the AIDS community have felt overwhelmed by the strategy, including PrEP4All executive director Jeremiah Johnson. He said in an email to TheBody that Shel Silverstein's poem, "How to Eat a Whale" — "She took little bites and she chewed very slow," the poet writes — has served as a reminder for how to approach such a feeling. "I have to remain focused on what I can achieve on any given day," he said.

Activist and TheBody contributor Mark S. King even wrote about this feeling on his award-winning blog, "My Fabulous Disease."

"The trauma — there's no other word for it, really — of the last few months continues to weigh heavily on my psyche and my energy level," he wrote. "Just as this administration clearly planned, the events are happening faster than I can process them. I have been thrown back on my heels." King also wrote about feelings of "self-conscious guilt" he has felt while staying on the sidelines as people he knows have taken to the streets.

Of course, taking to the streets is not the only way to be part of activism. While going out and marching is intense for the body, there are many areas of activism that require even more labor. Organizing is hard; it requires navigating social and emotional relationships, corralling people together, scheduling, working with government officials, working against government officials, spreading the word about gatherings and more.

It can be an unpaid full-time job, on top of any other paid work a person might do.

"Activism is work — and many people don't understand that," said Beto Pérez, a visual artist and organizer living with HIV in Tlaxcala, Mexico. "You need to be available all the time."

Thinking about activism as work often contradicts people's conceptions of reformers and protesters. They do it, in popular lore, because they believe in a higher cause. And while activists often do work to enact change for a larger purpose, that doesn't mean that activism is not hard work.

"People don't want to be activists," Pérez said. "People are pushed to be activists because situations are hard and they need to do something to make it better."

The importance of rest

For those engaged in traditional forms of work, the weekend exists. Even this two-day respite was only won by (unpaid) organizing by labor activists. For people who are currently a part of the response to the Trump administration's attacks on the AIDS infrastructure or trans rights, many must find places to rest or recharge within already-packed schedules.

Just as Silverstein's poem gave Johnson a model for how to take on the overwhelming amount of news, Johnson says that he has the same approach to rest. "What works for me is pacing myself throughout the day and having firm boundaries between when I'm 'on' and when I'm 'off,'" he said. "I try to make my evenings and most of my weekend about fully letting go of the battle. That means avoiding emails, news and any other kind of activation during my off hours and tapping into meditation and time spent with good friends to help my mind let go."

Being able to navigate the current political landscape will require rest. As Tricia Hersey, the powerhouse behind the Nap Ministry, so succinctly puts it: Rest is resistance.



During this particularly hostile political climate for people living with or affected by HIV, Dylan Boyer has found that creating art is now an even more essential tool in his routine. Photo credit: Dylan Boyer

"Grind culture has normalized pushing our bodies to the brink of destruction," Hersey wrote in the book *Rest Is Resistance*. "We proudly proclaim showing up to work or an event despite an injury, sickness or mental break. We are praised and rewarded for ignoring our body's need for rest, care and repair."

For Boyer, maintaining the distinction between time for working and time for resting is crucial for the next four years. "We need to realize when is the time to clock in, and when is the time to fight," he said.

Mathew Rodriguez is a contributor to TheBody. This column is a project of TheBody, Plus, Positively Aware, POZ and Q Syndicate, the LGBTQ+ wire service. Visit their websites (thebody.com, hivplusmag.com, positivelyaware.com and poz.com) for the latest updates on HIV/AIDS.

◀ Baptism

Continued from page 6

to be struggling with gender identity and asked whether there was anything she could do to support him.

Nawyn described the church staff as approaching the reaffirmation in a very careful and intentional manner. They offered several options, including just updating his baptismal records with his current, legal name. They explained that a reaffirmation could be an official, formal introduction to the church community, even though most of the congregation already knew Nawyn-Hellinga was trans.

"They were sensitive to all the different ways this could be a risk that Zach and our family is taking," Nawyn-Hellinga said. "There was a recognition that it requires bravery to do this. All these places that you think might not be accepting were incredible."

Nawyn-Hellinga said he has been lucky to have never faced ridicule for being trans, but that the church has gone the extra mile in allowing him to be himself.

"With the church, it was like with a snap of my fingers, I could immediately be my true self, surrounded by people who were affirming," Nawyn-Hellinga said. "And with the reaffirmation, I've felt a bit more connection with my spirituality and religion. It's been a nice place to grow up."

He is quick to point out his experience is not one all trans youth share. It is one reason he wanted to reaffirm his baptism.

"A lot of parts of Christianity seem to be against people in the queer community," Nawyn-Hellinga said. "I felt like this would show that it's not all of Christianity. I thought it would be really helpful to just show some light that there is support from the church to the queer community. Also, with a new presidency, I'm worried about my rights getting taken away and having some hope like this really, really helps."

After all, Schrott is cognizant of the political climate.

"There had already, during the election, been a lot of really hostile and ugly language toward the LGBTQ community, especially transgender individuals," Schrott said. "While we did not do it as a political statement, we did it as an affirmation that we as a church love everyone in our congregation — we see everyone in our congregation, and other people's political viewpoints weren't going to stand in the way."

"It was important for us to make that statement that all are loved."

When Nawyn-Hellinga stood before the congregation on the Baptism of the Lord Sunday, Schrott said he was greeted with eagerness and anticipation.

"People were tearing up, and it was just really beautiful," Schrott recalled. "The answer to the questions for the congregation — I don't want to say they yelled their support, but they were enthusiastic. And after the worship service, everybody just wanted to greet him and tell him how proud they were."

The pastoral staff searched for liturgy that had been developed for this situation and presented Nawyn-Hellinga with three options. He chose the one where the entire congregation says, "We see you, Zach."

"Some people have described it as giving them hope," Nawyn said. "Lots of people are feeling anxious and fearful about the attacks that are happening right now on trans people, on queer people and immigrants. The congregation was really excited and really proud to do this. People thanked us afterward."

Nawyn-Hellinga hopes that his story can bring comfort to others.

"It's important to remember that not everyone is against you," he said. "There are people out there who will support you for who you are. You might have to search around to find your place, but there are people there, and it might be in places where you might not think it would be."



Claude Johnson-Perry's baptismal service with Father Bill Luggier. Courtesy photos



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BETTY WHO'S ARTISTIC BREAKTHROUGH

In this political era, the artist isn't chasing escapism — she's building spaces where joy is honest, intentional and hard-won

BY EVE KUCHARSKI

It's natural for our creative sensibilities to shift as we get older. We get wiser, gain more experience and even more perspective. Over time, while we continue to love the music we consumed in the past, it's expected that our boundaries expand and our tastes change and broaden.

But what about from the artist's viewpoint? For Betty Who, who has consistently delivered bops over the last 10 years, a question has been front of mind recently: "Oh fuck, what do I write about?"

"Sometimes I'll be on stage and put on an outfit and think, 'Did I just come out here and sing some songs I made up so you guys can clap for me?' I don't think that 'I need you to clap for me' is my reason," admits Betty, 33. "Now I am looking at my approach to my projects and my approach to making music as, 'What do I want to say?' but also, 'What do other people need to hear?'"

One thing that is clear on this journey of creative self-reflection, though, is Betty Who's love for the pop genre.

"There's something about pop. I'm a pop girl stan. I grew up watching Britney Spears and thinking it doesn't have to mean something; she's just incredibly beautiful and she's shaking her abs for me and I'm 4 years old and I'm gagging and I don't even know why. It speaks to me. I'm just here," she says. "But I think when you can take a moment and go, 'But this is why we're here' — the 'why' is a big question for me right now."

That question was one of the primary drivers behind Betty's single, "Run!," released in April. The artist, who is queer and has a massive LGBTQ+ following, will bring her latest songs — including "Sweat," which premiered recently — on her "Out of the Darkness" summer tour.

Before her performance at 7 p.m. June 23 at Saint Andrew's Hall in Detroit, Betty shared her inspiration for the tour, insights about her songwriting process and why creative sustainability is her new focus.

We all know that pop is your



Betty Who. Photo: Zak Cassar

superpower, but what's your mid-power? For me, it's customer service calls.

And you're excellent at it. Not a superpower because you're not flying, but you're like, "I'm handling it." I know exactly what mine is, Eve; mine is silly. Mine is big "my mother" energy. Any time I meet a server I'm, "Hey, what's your name?" And then I use it the whole time and go like, "Thank you so much my friend" when speaking to customer service. It's my excellent small talk with people in the service industry — I like to be the one person who made their day not miserable. That is my mid-power.

Spreading joy and kindness in your daily life is very on-brand. Your single "Run!" is

high-energy and very positive, and it focuses on your own story and on rekindling the excitement and exuberance you had when you first started your career. Could you walk me through what inspired you to write this track?

I am the number one person who is the hardest on myself. I just wrote a different song about this entire same experience. I think that something I'm really working through in my creativity is trying to figure out [why] I have so much kindness for the waiter that I ask what their name is and I try to make their life easier but then up here? It's mental illness, innit? [Laughs] It's really hard; I have moments sometimes where I come up and out of my body and say, "What if I was nicer? What if I didn't

spend all of my mental and emotional energy doing this to myself?" When I watched "The Substance," there is a very pivotal moment where the two people are alive at the same time and they just start beating the shit out of each other. And I had one of those moments where I came up and out of my body and I was like, "Whoa, that's me to me. Oh." So I think that that is something that "Run!" also kind of encapsulates.

A huge part of putting yourself out there is audacity. That person still lives within me, but now I'm a lot less motivated to make her dreams come true because we've seen some things. You get older, you stumble a few too many times on the path to the life that you want and you're like, "This is hard, and I'm tired." And how do I continue to find a new way to approach building the life that I

always wanted with that same kind of intensity and focus? It's really an attempt to lock into that person and now, I have to do it for her. It's looking back at that little girl watching Britney Spears and going, "She wanted to be on stage, and now you have the chance to be on stage and you better use it, girlfriend!"

As audacious as it is, I truly think you need some youthful naivete to start a creative career because if you knew what you know now it might be too terrifying to begin! How has your creative approach changed since the start of your career?

I was in "Hadestown" on Broadway, which sort of changed my life but also eight shows a week for six months

was a totally new experience for me, and coming off of that, the last thing I wanted to do was anything. So the last year and a half I really have taken this time to be like, “What does it feel like to be a person in this moment in my life that is not chasing a dream every single second of every day that I am alive?” And I think in this stage of my life where I am very happily married, with my dog, and in this tiny house that we love, there are so many things about my life that are exactly as I would want them to be. I feel so lucky for that, but then I go to the studio to write a song and go, “Oh fuck, what do I write about?” I’m so happy, but it doesn’t really move the needle for me creatively in the same way that the ever-flowing sort of drama of my early 20s did.

I also think that knowing what I know about my community and how small and mighty we are, a huge part of what I love to do is make people feel seen and held and loved and creating a space where you can go, “Nobody in my life makes me feel this way, but I listened to this song and it makes me feel like I can go on another day.” That’s the power of music to me and what we do. So I am trying to lock into that place. Yes, there are some songs where I’m just

trying to have fun and I’m not trying to say anything crazy or motivational. Like, I’m putting out a song for Pride called “Sweat” and it’s not that difficult; we don’t have to think that hard. But there are moments moving forward that are less self-serving but more exciting at this stage in my life.

Queer joy feels so necessary in the current political climate, so sometimes even a song just about having fun can be so subversive. Fittingly, your tour is called “Out of the Darkness.” Can you share more about how you arrived at the name?

We went back and forth a little bit about what to call the tour because I had a couple of different ideas, but for me, “Out of the Darkness” definitely symbolized something I had been going through, which was reemerging from my cave and literally from this room playing notes on a piano. But I think that I’m trying to think of my show in that same sort of community service way. For “Out of the Darkness,” my entire approach and my goal for the tour is to create an environment where I go, “Hey, I know things are really crazy.” And everybody has their own version,

whether you’re really engaged politically and [are aware of how] they’re trying to take our rights away or if you’re like, “I can’t pay for my groceries,” I’m like, totally diva, bad vibes only.

There’s a lot of stuff going on and [at the upcoming shows we can] acknowledge that it’s a difficult time and choose joy regardless and create an environment to dip in for a second and talk about pain. And let’s explore that through song, and let’s move together through these emotions where we could leave some of that behind. Let’s try to let go of a little bit of our dread, because there is so much dread, and there are days where I’m like, “How am I supposed to not feel horrible all the time?” Live music has always been something that, for me, brings me up and out of myself, and I’m trying to create an environment where we can celebrate in spite of what is going on in the world.

The beauty of live music and particularly a pop show is that you can go to just have fun, but it can serve as a feedback loop for what feels like energy transfer between the performer and the audience, which can be so

positive. Sometimes you leave a concert feeling like you’re floating two feet off of the ground.

And the way that music plays a role in our daily lives, as well. I’ve always believed that your favorite song plays at the grocery store and all of sudden I’m like, “I love this song” and I’m picking up my rice and I’m like, hell yeah: “We begin to rock steady!” Or whatever is playing, like Michelle Branch’s “Everywhere” that I always hear in CVS.

It’s the way that music comes at us in our life both diegetically and non-diegetically — we are choosing music as well as being fed it everywhere we go. So I think that that thing you’re talking about — I always forget how meaningful it can be to go see an artist whose music you love and you give them a chance to reawaken your love for that music and the catalog. Our world runs on hit songs in some way, but then there are albums and albums of music that people forget about and people forget they love songs and people go, “I heard this song and it didn’t mean anything to me but now that you’ve sung it live I have a whole new relationship to it.”

I think I’m not alone in feeling like various songs can serve as windows to specific types of emotions or energy. Music serves as such a powerful connector. And I think artists are especially skilled at connecting people, so it makes sense to me that shifting to a post-Covid world that is just now getting back into the swing of live performances again would shift and impact how you approach things creatively.

I’m entering this new phase that’s only just now starting to reveal itself to me, and then another 10 years will go by, which is how long I’ve been doing this already, and then I’ll have a totally new experience. I think I spent a lot of time in the first decade of my career feeling very lost because I knew I had so much to give and I didn’t know what the path or the purpose was. It’s the young person I was talking about in the beginning of “Run!” who’s like, “I know that I’m supposed to do this but I just don’t know even what that

See **Betty Who**, page 24

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2025 Pride Calendar

‘Drag Race’ Standout Adore Delano Set to Headline Lansing Pride 2025

Old Town festival promises full day of queer joy

Get ready to turn up on Turner Street — Lansing Pride 2025 is coming in hot with headliner Adore Delano taking the stage June 28. The powerhouse performer, singer-songwriter and reality TV icon first captivated audiences on “American Idol” before taking the world by storm on “RuPaul’s Drag Race” Season 6 and “All Stars” Season 2. With a fierce voice, electrifying stage presence and hit albums like “Till Death Do Us Party” and “Dirty Laundry,” Adore is ready to bring an unforgettable performance to Michigan’s capital city.

It’s a full day of queer joy, community celebration and inclusive fun running 1-10 p.m. in the heart of Lansing’s Old Town neighborhood spanning several blocks along Turner Street. Don’t miss the all-day entertainment celebrating Michigan’s LGBTQ+ community with performers, vendors and community members.

More information is available at lansingpride.org.



Adore Delano. Photo: Instagram/@vadellaphoto

SATURDAY, JUNE 21

Fenton Pride

Rackham Park (150 S. Leroy Street), 2-7 p.m.

fentonpride.org

The heart of the fest lives in Rackham Park with the Fenton Pride Collective, vendors and community orgs, but the fun doesn’t stop there. Local downtown businesses are also getting in on the action, offering sweet discounts and special Pride-themed food and drinks. Lesbian lemonade? Bear biscuits? Lavender love lattes? Bi-burgers? Rainbow ravioli?

Additionally, organizers note that Fenton Pride has another notable tradition: it’s typically hot. Like, summer-sizzle, glitter-melting hot. So dress cute and comfy — think breathable fabrics and maybe a fan you can wave dramatically.

Grand Rapids Pride (through June 22)

Calder Plaza (320 Ottawa Ave. NW, Grand Rapids)

grPrideorg/pride-festival

Grand Rapids Pride Festival is back for its 37th year — which means it’s officially older than most TikTok influencers and just as fabulous. Join the party, as West Michigan comes out (again!) to celebrate radical joy, community and the beautiful messiness of queer interconnectedness. GR Pride packs Calder Plaza with over 150 vendors, food trucks galore, a beer garden with NA options (because hydration is sexy), all-ages activities and a sensory space.

Livonia Pride

Schoolcraft College (18600 Haggerty Road, Livonia), 11 a.m.- 2 p.m.

livoniapride.org

Livonia Pride is back and ready to party in a brand-new spot — Schoolcraft College! While the entertainment lineup is still under wraps (ooh, mysterious!), you can still show this big-hearted little Pride some love. Add them as your charitable contribution partner on the Kroger app and let your grocery runs turn into tiny acts of queer joy.

Michiana PrideFest (Niles)

Riverfront Park, Niles, 4-8 p.m.

outcenter.org/pridefest

This is the third installment of the Michiana Pridefest, part of the three-event Pridefest On Tour series. And we bet you’ll have three times the fun as anything the straight folks at your job will be doing that same weekend! More details to come about this fabulous event on the banks of St. Joseph River at, well, Riverfront Park.

Three Rivers (Downriver Pride)

Downtown Three Rivers (103 Portage Ave.), 12-11 p.m.

www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61568270740208

Wyandotte (Downriver Pride) (through June 22)

Downtown Wyandotte, 12.-11 p.m.

downriverpride.com

Downriver Pride has already released a tentative list of 2025 Pride vendors, and it looks like they’ll have our mouths watering and our fanny packs open, reaching for our collective rainbow wallets! Roasted nuts? Tattoos? Candles? Spa treatments? They’re all queering it up. Entertainment listings to come.

SUNDAY, JUNE 22

Berkley Pride Block Party

Downtown Berkley, 1-5 p.m.

www.instagram.com/berkleypride

Berkley Pride returns for the fourth year, hosting another block party with activities for all ages; a kids’ tent (crafts, facepainting, maybe occasional adorable mayhem), a teen lounge and DJ Laura from L Sharp Productions. Plus, you can secure your very own Berkley Pride T-shirt so you can wear your heart (and your city) on your sleeve!

Plymouth Pride

Old Village Neighborhood, 2-6 p.m.

oldvillageplymouth.com/pride

Liberty Street in Plymouth will be closed for the second annual Pride event and converted into a fabulous, fun space for all. Check out the vendors, resource

See **Pride Calendar**, page 22

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◀ **Pride Calendar**
Continued from page 20

tables and, of course, an amazing pride stage with a DJ and drag performers all afternoon!

THURSDAY, JUNE 26

Canton Pride OUTside

Heritage Park (1150 S. Canton Center), 6:30-8:30 p.m.

cantonmi.gov/calendar

SATURDAY, JUNE 28

Holland Pride

Centennial Park (250 Central Ave.), 1-6 p.m.

outonthelakeshore.org/holland-pride

Out On The Lakeshore seems tickled pink (tickled rainbow?) to be bringing back Holland Pride to Centennial Park. You can spend the afternoon soaking up fabulous entertainment, tasty bites from food trucks, awesome merch, helpful resources and fun for every age — from toddlers to chosen aunties.

Lansing Pride

Old Town (216 E. Cesar E. Chavez Ave.), 1-10 p.m.

Lansingpride.org

Monroe County Pride

St Mary's Park (111 W. Elm Ave., Monroe), 1-7 pm.

monroecountypride.org

Monroe County Pride is bringing together local drag, resources, food trucks, an art market and every single one of your exes — all together under the banner Love Is Everything.

Owosso Pride

Curwood Castle Park (224 Curwood Castle Drive, Owosso), 1-5 p.m.

facebook.com/OwossoPride

Owosso Pride Festival 2025 is gearing up — and while the entertainment lineup is still under wraps, you can certainly still sign up to be a volunteer. Wrangling folding tables in a glitter strewn park will undoubtedly build queer character and it's a great way to meet Mx Right (or Mx Right Now, if that's more your style).

Great Lakes Bay Pride Festival (Saginaw)

Jolt Credit Union Event Park (300 Johnson St, Saginaw), 11 a.m.- 7 p.m.

greatlakesbaypride.org

The Great Lakes Bay Pride Festival is not a newcomer to the Pride scene, but they are at a brand new location this year with more room, more sparkle and more ways to keep everyone safe and smiling. This free, family-friendly outdoor fest brings together LGBTQ+ folks, allies, chosen family and supportive humans from all over the region. You'll find retail vendors, community resources, live entertainment, health screenings and a full-on kids' activity zone (because little queers and future allies deserve fun too). And don't forget the afterparty at the Dow Center, the largest drag event in the region!

South Haven Pride

Stanley Johnston Park (202 Dyckman Ave.), 12-10 p.m.

www.facebook.com/southhavenmichiganpride

South Haven Pride is now in its sophomore Pride, and they're primed to outdo their first year's spectacularity! Expect vendors, entertainment, live DJ and dancing and — of course — cornhole. Because queers love a lawn game!

Twin Cities PrideFest (St. Joseph)

Shadowland Pavilion (101 Broad St., Silver Beach County Park), 4-8 p.m.

outcenter.org/pridefest

Now in its fabulous fourth year, Twin Cities PrideFest is the seasoned trailblazer of the Pridefest On Tour crew — the granddaddy, grandslappy or maybe just the glamparent of the bunch? Whatever you call it, this joyful beachside bash at Silver Beach County Park is bringing the sunshine, the sparkle and the queer cheer. Come for the vibes, stay for the beautiful water views!

JUNE 29

DeWitt Pride in the Park

Riverside Park (405 S Bridge St., DeWitt), 12-3 p.m.

midewittpride.org

The second annual DeWitt Pride

in the Park promises more of the same family-friendly fun that brought the community together in 2024, including games, activities, snacks and more. Sign up to volunteer or support DeWitt Pride with a donation at midewittpride.org.

Pride Big Rapids

Downtown Big Rapids, 12-8 p.m.

pridebigrapids.org

Big Rapids Pride wants us to “Turn Up the Pride: Love Louder” and they're going to give us just the opportunity to practice with a queer joy, community cheer and maybe a little dancing like no one's watching (but they totally are and they love your moves). Be prepared for 70+ vendors ready to delight, dazzle and maybe tempt you into buying another pronoun pin, family and kids' activities to keep little hands busy and little hearts full, a quiet area to recharge and live entertainment that'll have you clapping, cheering and possibly shedding some tears (the good kind).

Bluewater Pridefest (Port Huron)

Downtown Port Huron (McMorran Plaza) 1-7 p.m.

bluewaterallies.com/team-1

Bluewater Pridefest takes over downtown Port Huron for this family-friendly event that will include a special kids' zone (rumors of a cute clown abound), entertainment, amazing food and big queer smiles!

Buchanan Pride On The Common

The Common (122 Days Ave., Buchanan), 1-8 p.m.

buchananpride.com

Buchanan Pride on The Common has a little something for everyone and a full day of joy starting with a vibrant vendor market, lively samba performances and dance lessons from Cultural Arts Everywhere. Plus, DJ Chuck Fry will be spinning tunes before and after a high-powered set from the UltraFab Band.

Farmington Pride In The Park

Shiawassee Park (32340 Shiawassee St., Farmington), 2-5 p.m.

It's Farmington's very first Pride



Straits Pride. Courtesy photo

event and they'll have vendors and activities for everyone from age 5 to 105!

JULY

JULY 12

South Lyon Pride

McHattie Park (300 Dorothy St.), 12-4 p.m.

facebook.com/SouthLyonPride

The 5th annual South Lyon Pride is once again gracing McHattie Park with a glitter-infused presence.

JULY 18

Battle Creek Pride (through July 20)

Parade kick-off: Michigan Ave. at Washington St., July 18, 7 p.m.

Festival: Leila Aboretum (928 W. Michigan Ave.), July 19, 12-8 p.m.

Candlelight Vigil: Battle Creek Pride Resource Center (104 Calhoun St, Battle Creek), July 20th, 8 p.m.

battlecreekpride.org

Battle Creek Pride makes a weekend of it! The festivities kick off Friday with an evening parade — promptly at 7 p.m., so save your emotional ex-texts for later and snag a good view of that softball league float you've been waiting for all year. Saturday brings the main event: drag, music, dancing and a plethora of vendors. And on Sunday, the celebration slows down with a candlelight vigil, honoring lives lost to violence and the brave folks who made the weekend's joy possible.

JULY 19

Flint Pride

Saturday, July 19, downtown Flint (multiple venues), 2-8 p.m.

facebook.com/flintgaypride

Flint Pride is turning 15 — just old enough to be full of feelings and fabulousness! The usual venue, Riverbank Park may be getting a glow-up, but Flint Pride isn't missing a beat. Instead, Pride takes over multiple downtown venues, with music, performances, food vendors and vibrant community energy. Think of it as a little Pride adventure — same sparkle, new stomping grounds.

JULY 22-26

Hotter Than July (Detroit)

Detroit (multiple venues and dates)

2025 marks the 30th anniversary of LGBT Detroit's annual summer Pride event, Hotter Than July. Michigan's longest-running Black LGBTQ+ Pride event, the celebration features several key events:

Tuesday, July 22 — Candlelight vigil, Palmer Park

Wednesday, July 23 — Reception — Detroit Historical Museum, mixer

Thursday, July 24 — Film festival

Friday, July 25 — Annual gathering for LGBTQ+ issues; mayoral candidate forum; official opening party, Pandora's Boxx

Saturday, July 26 — Palmer Park picnic

Sunday, July 27 — Worship service at One Church Detroit; Sunday brunch with Billionaires Boys Club

hotterthanjuly.org

JULY 26

Royal Oak Pride

Downtown Royal Oak, 1-11 p.m.
prideroyaloak.com

AUGUST

AUG. 2

Downtown Ann Arbor, Schedule TBA
annarborpride.com

AUG. 16

Jackson Pride

Horace Blackman Park (W. Michigan Ave. and S. Jackson St.), 2-9 p.m.
mijacksonPrideorg/events

Jackson Pride is gearing up for a day of fun, flavor and fierce celebration under the banner “Equality Now! No Turning Back!” With food trucks, live music and dancing and the iconic Walk of Pride.

Macomb County Pride Festival

Main Street between Macomb Place and Market Street, Mount Clemens, 12-6 p.m.
macombcountypride.com

Last year’s Macomb County Pride Festival was attended by more than 5,000 happy folks; this

year, the festival returns with entertainment, resources, a family-friendly Youth Zone and additional youth-focused entertainment. Plus, it’s all pet-friendly so pack up your portable water dish, Stonewall the Dog and Ferret Faucet (that’s your pet ferret, but with a drag name) and spend your Saturday afternoon basking in the brilliance and warmth of LGBTQ+ community!

AUG. 23

Transgender Pride in the Park

Martin Road Park (1900 Orchard Ave., Ferndale), 12-6 p.m.
Transgender Michigan’s annual event features a BYO picnic, entertainment, speakers and more. This year, the organization will mark the 54th anniversary of the Compton Cafeteria Riots, when trans women in San Francisco’s Tenderloin district fought back against police harassment in August 1966 (before Stonewall), sparking transgender activism in the city and nationwide.
transgendermichigan.org/transgender-pride

SEPTEMBER

SEPT. 11

Straits Pride (Mackinac Island)

Mackinac Island, Details TBA
straitspride.org

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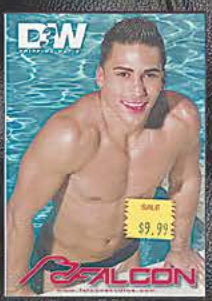
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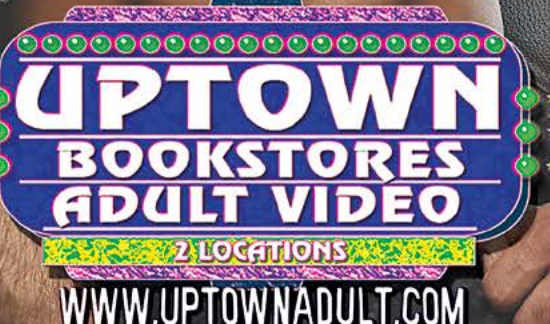









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Betty Who

Continued from page 19

means, and I don't know where I'm going. I'm just going to run as fast as I can." And then, all of a sudden, I look around and I'm in the middle of a field and then I'm like, "Well, how did I get here and why am I alone?" So I think what feels really nice in this new phase as it reveals itself to me is sustainability.

You said that when you performed in "Hadestown" on Broadway there was very little time to recuperate because of the schedule, but on your own tour, you've learned from dancers who have to stretch and prep their bodies daily that that is the best way they can achieve longevity and sustainability. What has it been like adhering to a more sustainable tour approach?

In the transformation into Persephone in "Hadestown," I come in as me and then they put the wig on me and the lashes on and I have these crazy nails that are 17 inches long — and the least me thing of all time — and then all of a sudden I'm her, I get to work, and then it all comes off and I'm me again. It's been hard for me to find that separation between me and Betty Who because it is so personal. And so "Run!" is about me and exactly what happened in my life, but it's more like a metaphor. I wrote that from my own lens about something I think everybody experiences. And so, I think the selfishness of it was what was so intoxicating about it for so long, and now it's the thing that makes it really unsustainable. Shifting that mindset a little bit has helped me approach it from less of a, "If you don't like this then that means that I am bad" approach that is heartbreaking.

What I want is to be surrounded by people who love me and see me. I want to make breakfast for me and my husband and walk the dog and do all of those things that feel so much more zoomed in — and that is what my real life is. And the fact that I get to go out and play shows for thousands of people over the summer is not totally all that I am, and it is more of a job now as opposed to the way it used to be, which

was my entire identity which I think is healthier [laughs] and it helps me enjoy it more.

This new perspective also brought new songs, in addition to "Run!" Can fans expect to hear some of those tracks during your tour?



Betty Who. Photo: Zak Cassar

I'm really excited about this new music. I have taken everything so seriously for so long and we're at a time where everything feels so dire, and I'm really trying to create an energy of fun as joy as protest — I think if you come to a show this summer that is what you will experience. I really want you to come and let it all out.

I want you to come and dance, I want you to come with an open heart and mind and move through some things so that you can find the ability to let loose and scream your heart out to "I Love You Always Forever," Donna Lewis, 1996 — still going strong with Betty Who in 2025. That's the whole point. These moments that make life worth living is when you look around and you're looking at your best friend because a song makes you think of them and you're singing it to them in the room. That is, to me, the lifeblood of the reason we are all here: to feel joy and share moments. I'm really trying to create that moment on tour. We will run out of the darkness together.

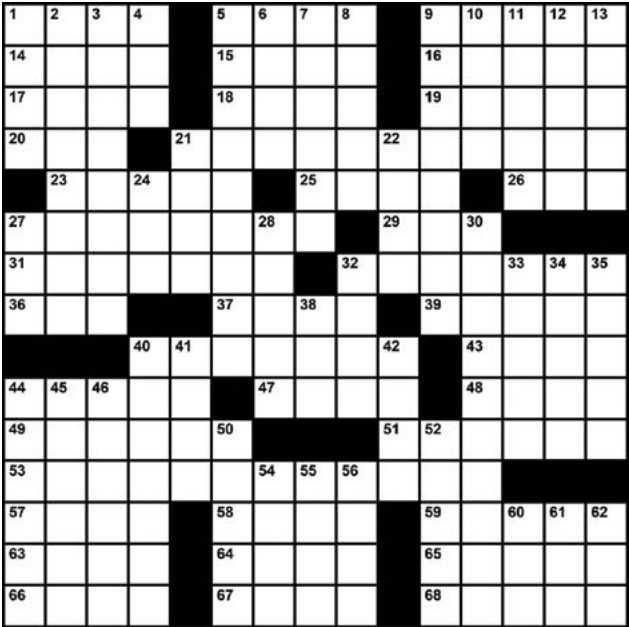
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Across

- 1 Besides that
- 5 Performs for Shakespeare
- 9 Billy Eichner's "___ and Recreation"
- 14 Where they yell "Cut!"
- 15 Hairy twin
- 16 Like a woman without a

- woman
- 17 Seduce
- 18 Key West storm prelude
- 19 When repeated, a "Funny Girl" song
- 20 Khan's title
- 21 Gay rights supporter who sings "Shake It Off"
- 23 Prepared to shoot off
- 25 Phantom of the Opera name
- 26 Keanu's role in "The Matrix"
- 27 Casey Jones, e.g.
- 29 Get-up-and-go
- 31 Gay rights supporter who

- sings "Umbrella"
- 32 Gay rights supporter who sings "Single Ladies"
- 36 Hrs. in P-town
- 37 Treat meat
- 39 Contempt
- 40 One who hits the slopes in Aspen
- 43 "Cat on ___ Tin Roof"
- 44 Expand upon
- 47 Make more bearable
- 48 Inventor Elias
- 49 Amanda of "Married... with Children"
- 51 Pansy, for one
- 53 Gay rights supporter who sings "Rhythm Nation"
- 57 Beat, but barely
- 58 Caesar's "See!"
- 59 Lucy's gal pal
- 63 Boston cager, for short
- 64 Returned-mdse. entry, at Barneys
- 65 Yield
- 66 Very, in Vichy
- 67 "Bill & ___ Excellent Adventure"
- 68 Name on a drag queen's compact

Down

- 1 Item 1 "___ Enchanted"
- 2 Olympic diver Greg
- 3 What the 4 gay rights supporters in this puzzle have in common
- 4 Tongue ending
- 5 New Orleans' "Southern ___" festival

- 6 Anthem starter
- 7 More like Albee's 3 women
- 8 Specialty of Wanda Sykes
- 9 Secure access to exclusive queer spaces
- 10 What there oughta be
- 11 He made hard bodies
- 12 Penetrating weapon
- 13 Take care of
- 21 Dramatist Williams, for short?
- 22 Like a fruit ready to be eaten
- 24 Hamm of the World Cup
- 27 It may come before long
- 28 ___ Cologne
- 30 Disney flick about a Native American princess
- 32 Queens rule over them
- 33 Gomer's "not at all"
- 34 "Gladiator" star Russell
- 35 Return key on a PC
- 38 Abbr. on a Froot Loops box
- 40 Castro, in San Francisco, and others
- 41 Like a generation, to Stein
- 42 Caitlin Clark's sometime nemeses
- 44 Wretched
- 45 Less lively, as a party
- 46 What your ding-a-ling may do
- 50 Spit out
- 52 "My Fair Lady" composer
- 54 Area of 160 rods
- 55 Reproduced nonheterosexually, for short?
- 56 Joggers may wear them out
- 60 Single, to Glenn Burke
- 61 Beard for Adam and Steve?
- 62 Liberace's nickname

See p. 19 for answers



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who aren't on a stage — how can they get others to listen, especially when it comes to something like trans legislation?

I think it's a byproduct of growing up where I did. Because I grew up in a small town in Texas, I didn't have the luxury of only being around people who believed in the same things as me. I had to be friends with and live next to and go to school with and carpool with people who are fundamentally different ideologically than me, so different religious practices, you know. One of my best friends from high school and elementary school ended up double majoring in Bible and business. I come from an extremely evangelical, very white town. I am so grateful for it because what it gave me was a deep understanding of what it means to build belonging across differences and how to hold and have competing ideas of the world, how to still find a shared and common approach. As a young kid, I really learned how to build real relationships with people and friendships, and those friendships are still friends I carry now with me, 25 years later. So I guess my advice is learning how to take off the mask and being really honest and real.

One of the things I really worry about is that algorithms have trained us to believe that people are just one dimensional and can be understood just by one belief or one action, when I actually know that the way that we live is so complex and contradictory, and when people feel seen in their complexity, then there's actually so much more opportunity to build rather than when you come in with a predetermined idea of, oh, you're opposed against me.

And what I found especially about trans issues is that it's the framing that alienates people more than the actual issue. So if I come in and I say.

"Hey, we had a great afternoon together. Didn't we have a lot of fun? We spoke about our family. We spoke about our life. We spoke about this great TV show. When I leave this conversation, I'm gonna have to go on a train, and on this train I might die. Someone

might kill me because of what I look like. Does that make you upset?" Inevitably, people will be like, "That's horrible. I don't want anyone to have to live in fear like that." Then I say, you know, that's the experience of a lot of trans people. Every single day we have to be worried about our physical safety. The reason we have to be worried about our physical safety is because people look at us, and they have all these assumptions about who we are and those assumptions come from a lot of no-good actors, a lot of politicians and media people who are making money off of making me seem like a threat whenever I'm just trying to live my life and exercise my right to live and express myself. And then you start connecting the dots in a way that is linked to your biography, not to a hypothetical.

I think that's why trans storytelling is so important right now — because most people don't know us. We're still in this phase where people don't even know us. And when they do know us, something shifts. Also, we can't come in and say, "Care about trans rights, care about LGBTQ+ rights," if we don't care about the quality of the water in someone's tap and how expensive their groceries are. And that's where it starts becoming, I think, easier to make inroads: when we connect it to everyone's common struggle.

I want to shift to your influence. Your name comes up often — in conversations with people like queer icon Margaret Cho. You've also had a meaningful impact on people like Demi Lovato. How does it feel to be recognized by those who see you as a pioneering voice for queer representation in the arts, comedy and beyond?

It's pretty cool, I'm not gonna lie. And it's that Texan in me that also is like, all these big people also have small feelings. I think we forget that, too, that these are just human beings. I'm a big believer that our heroes should be our peers. Our heroes don't just need to be mythological figures from the past or people we look up to from a distance. It should be our friends in our community.

It's been my peers in the industry who have been the ones who have told me like, "Girl, you're doing amazing work. But



Alok Vaid-Menon. Photo: Laura Shepherd

are you sleeping?"

Do you plan on doing this until you're 50?

I'm gonna do this until I die. I mean, hopefully, and I'll hopefully live beyond 50. But I genuinely feel like I have found my purpose on Earth, and I feel like when I'm on stage. I'm the freest version of me I've ever been, and I love being on stage so much. Now I've been a stage performer for about 15 years, and in each year it gets sweeter and sweeter and better and better and better, and I want to be able to do this forever.

These anti-drag laws hit me at a deeper place than anything else

because I had always understood the stage as a sanctuary where I could be me. Then I started to realize they're coming for stages, too, and for art. That's felt really confronting and has been a hard pill to swallow.

With this being Pride Month, what does Pride mean to you in this current political era?

It's really recommitting to what the purpose of Pride was. Pride began in 1969 with Stonewall. It began because queer people came together and said, "I've had enough. Let's go back to the basics." The basics are: We need each other. We gotta heal the rifts within us. Because the truth

is, over the past decade or so we've seen a widening rift. A lot of cis gay and lesbian folks have aggressively distanced themselves from trans and gender-nonconforming people, which is so ironic because it was the trans and gender nonconforming people who, in many ways, catalyzed their own movements. So how are we supposed to win if we can't even accept each other? I'm hoping this Pride we can really take some internal inventory to actually become an LGBTQ+ community again and heal those rifts. Because when we don't heal those rifts, I think it's really easy to create a culture of fear-mongering and polarization, because we don't have unity.

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